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'Student Voice' in Italy: the State of the Art

Valentina Grion
University of Padua

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Valentina Grion, Senior Researcher, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, and Applied Psychology, University of Padua

While educational literature at the international level has acknowledged an emerging public awareness about the urgency and opportunity to entrust students with a more central role in the context of school and university management and reform for some years now (Angus, 2006; Blair & Noel, 2014; Cook-Sather & Luz, 2014; Smyth, 2005), notice of this by educational researchers and practitioners has only been emerging in Italy for a few years, for the potential inherent in listening to and making students jointly responsible in these processes, and more generally, as a winning strategy for the improvement of teaching/learning and management practices.

The stimulus that encouraged the realisation of the first national initiatives on the "Student Voice" came from the publication of the first Italian book on the matter, co-authored by myself and Alison Cook-Sather (Grion & Cook-Sather, 2013). Actually, if focus was placed on educational research literature in Italy, it would be clear that, in a national context, the expression "Student Voice" was first used only in 2013. Two goals were sought with this publication, in fact: on the one hand to introduce an internationally consolidated pedagogic perspective and, on the other, to gather and share national experiences that could be identified as approaches near to the "Student Voice" view.

It must be acknowledged that the second goal in particular was fully achieved, as it allowed some Italian education researchers — who, up to this point, had operated using "Student Voice" approaches in an isolated manner in different areas of Italy — to know each other and share the same perspective of research. This process also brought about the birth of one of the largest pedagogic research projects in Italy, as part of SIPED[1], a national work group that has met several times since then to identify some shared lines of research that, as recognised by Grion and Dettori (2015), are improved thanks to the comparison with the experiences of schools, universities and societies that are sometimes very different from each other (in the north and south of the country, large cities and small towns, etc.).

It must be pointed out that the "Student Voice" perspective was bound to find fertile ground for development in Italy. In the Italian educational tradition, there are several elements that can be considered precursors or the foundations of the "Student Voice" approach. Some current pedagogical discussions, such as certain educational practices, still refer greatly to the great educators or researchers such as Don Bosco, Maria Montessori, Don Milani and others, who opened the path to a libertarian style of education that guaranteed an active role and autonomy for the person being educated.

At the beginning of the 19th century, before the advent of activism in Italy, Giovanni Melchiorre Bosco, better known as Don Bosco, placed the pupil at the centre of the educational process, and created the measurement of his growth by the ability to use the freedom provided to him. The educational system set up by the teaching expert left children the full possibility of speaking and expressing themselves about whatever interested them most and involved them, stating "motivation" and "involvement" as the main educational strategies. In her book *Educare alla libertà* Maria Montessori (1950), the first women to be awarded a degree in medicine in Italy at the end of the 19th century, talked negatively of school desks, calling them "the black

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[1] Italian society of Pedagogy. See http://www.siped.it/

catafalques," as she considered them to place limits on a child's expressive freedom and proposed a method that encouraged autonomous activity and spontaneity in children, as it was the only way for them to reveal their true selves, by expressing themselves freely and self-limit themselves.

However, more than in that of the previous education experts, it was in Don Milani's method that I believe the most obvious presence of the "Italian seeds" of the "Student Voice" can be found, in particular those developments in the "Student Voice" approach that focused on the relationships and hierarchies of internal powers within educational institutes with consequent repercussions in social contexts. These are experiences in which "Student Voice" combines topics such as that of "democracy," "participation," and "social justice" (see, for example, Fielding, 2012, 2015). In *Lettera ad una professoressa* (Scuola di Barbiana, 1976), a book written by Don Lorenzo Milani together with his pupils — and in this area too, Don Milani is a precursor of "Student Voice" — the principles of the "Barbiana School" are illustrated, while at the same time attacking traditional schools, called "a hospital that cares for the healthy and rejects the sick," as it does not work to listen to and integrate children in difficulty, while it enhances those with a positive family background that accompanies and supports them. In this sense, Don Milani's action brings to mind that *advocacy research* that Smyth and McInerney (2012) believe to be an ethical principle of the researcher who wishes to work "with" and "for" children, and a commitment to social justice. The Don Milani school-community promotes equal opportunities and provides a voice for everyone, with special attention for the latter. Education is considered to be a path of transformation and emancipation and uses tools such as cooperation and solidarity, connected with freedom. It must be achieved as a tangible expression of democracy.

However, it must be pointed out that while such educational sensitivities represent a significant background of pre-school and a certain part of primary school (Grion, 2014), they are not a cultural heritage of secondary education or universities. In the same way, the introduction of "Student Voice" into educational research and practices in Italy has created greater enthusiasm among those who teach and carry out research in primary school rather than among teachers and researchers in secondary and higher education, an educational environment, particularly the latter, that is characterised by deep roots in the "traditional" teaching approach, and by teaching practices that are performed mostly as "teaching-as-telling," by strategies linked to "lecture methods," where the student plays no active and participatory role.

As part of this context, "Student Voice" is a "revolution" that only some researchers and teachers have known how to and wanted to use. The first experiences carried out at some Italian universities, reported in the second Italian book that gathers experiences and research carried out with a view to "Student Voice," bear witness to the first experiences (Gemma & Grion, 2015). However, we feel we must acknowledge that the latter have an approach that we could define as "primitive" compared to the more mature international proposals for "Student Voice"; they are experiences and research that give the students a marginal role and that have little effect on truly transforming university practices and empowering themselves. They halt at that stage of student participation that Fielding (2015) indicates as "students as data source" or, at most, achieve what is called "students as active respondents," where staff invite student dialogue and discussion to deepen learning/professional decisions. With reference to Seale (2010), we could refer to said situation as being "teacher-centric," as they emphasise the activities that teachers undertake (asking, seeing, hearing or reflecting) rather than the student's active role.

On the other hand, given the only short path that "Student Voice" has beaten in Italy for now, it is necessary to look at this work as fruitful seeds for the development of more mature experiences.

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A part of this overview, the research conducted nationally by Monica Fedeli, which included the student participation experiences presented here by Daniela Frison and Claudio Melacarne together with the students involved, can only be seen with special satisfaction by those, like me, who have pursued the development of the "Student Voice" in Italy. I believe that this work is an important stimulus and a key point for the development of a different approach to the student-teacher relationship and for the improvement of Italian university education. I believe they can be considered with the same thought for which Cook-Sather writes: "attending to students' experiences and perspectives and embracing students as partners and change agents in explorations of pedagogical practice constitute a threshold concept in academic development" (Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 195).

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